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REMINISCENCES OF THE CIVIL WAR BY A  
CONFEDERATE STAFF OFFICER\*

(*FIFTH PAPER*)

THE BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS, AND THE  
RACE FOR RICHMOND

The sun was just rising and I was riding rapidly down the plank road towards the firing in front when I overtook General Lee. He said, "Captain Ranson, I expect you to look after the ordnance trains to-day." I replied that I was going now to look after the trains of Heth's and Wilcox's Divisions of the Third Corps, as they seemed to be heavily engaged in front.

Riding on I found signs of a retreat, as I passed some men who appeared to be stragglers, the firing in front increasing every moment, mingled with loud cheering. Presently I came to an open field on the left of the road, in which was camped a large ordnance train. Going forward I ordered the men to put in their horses and move to the rear as rapidly as possible. They were already beginning to hitch up, and I hurried them all I could. Whilst thus engaged I saw the retreating men of the two divisions in front emerging from the woods and falling back slowly and sullenly across the field. The enemy seemed to be close on their heels, and came on cheering and firing. I noticed, too, that the horses of the ordnance train began to drop in their tracks, and I knew then that the ordnance train was lost. The horses were still falling rapidly when the enemy appeared in the edge of the woods on the opposite side of the field, about three hundred yards from where I was posted. They poured one deadly volley into the poor horses and wagons, and the wagons began to blow up, so that the destruction seemed to be complete. As I could do nothing I turned away and rode rapidly back to meet General Lee. When I met him I informed him of what

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The first of this series of articles by Major Ranson was published in the October, 1913, issue of the REVIEW. The sixth and concluding paper will appear in the January issue.—EDITOR.

had happened to the train, and of the rout of the two divisions of Heth and Wilcox. He told me to ride back and hurry up Longstreet, who was approaching from the rear.

I met General Longstreet about five miles in the rear, riding at the head of his troops, marching in columns of fours down the plank road. When I delivered General Lee's message he halted and ordered his men to deploy right and left in the woods. When this manœuvre was completed the line of battle moved on slowly through the woods in the direction of the firing. When the line met the retreating troops in front Longstreet's men were ordered to lie down and the retreating line passed over them. The enemy was still advancing, cheering and firing as they came on. I heard the officers near me order the men to reserve their fire until the enemy was within twenty yards of them. There was a dead silence on our side for a few minutes, all the noise being made by the enemy, who, flushed with victory and seeing no enemy, were in the jolliest mood.

When only a few yards away there was a deafening roar of musketry from Longstreet's troops, which seemed to shake the earth itself. The enemy was said to be in three lines of battle. Certainly there was a crowd of them coming on and in some confusion too, being perfectly confident. Longstreet's men having delivered that deadly volley at close range, rose at once from the ground and charged with a yell. I rode behind our line for two or three miles, I suppose, the enemy retreating in the utmost confusion and suffering fearfully from the deadly fire which our men continued to pour into them. Presently we came to the field in which the ordnance train had been partially destroyed in the early morning; and near this point, but beyond it, Longstreet's men halted and went into line of battle, and began to fortify by piling pieces of wood and throwing up dirt, leaves, anything to obstruct a bullet.

On my return to the Army of Northern Virginia in 1863 I found that the men had learned much of the art of war,—of defence especially. Men in line of battle with an enemy in front, when halted, immediately began to fortify. Often I have seen officers of the line, on a march, carrying spades or shovels, and wondered why at first, but soon found out. No matter how brief

the halt the men began to fortify, and the shovels were needed. I once came upon a cousin with a shovel on his shoulder, marching with his company, being a captain in the Stonewall Brigade. I asked him what he was going to do with the shovel. He replied, "It is said the pen is mightier than the sword. We have found the shovel the mightiest."

If the men were attacked they could not be driven except by an overwhelming force with the bayonet or by a flanking movement, and as both these expedients were costly and dangerous, they were seldom resorted to. If the men entrenched were ordered to go forward, their trenches were left behind, but then they knew that if they were driven back, their trenches were ready for them, and this knowledge gave confidence.

I was abroad during the Boer War, and being a member of an English Club frequented by numbers of officers on leave or retired, once asked why the English did not adopt Boer methods of defence and attack. The answer was, "Oh, the English fight in the open and believe in the bayonet." I replied that methods had changed; that formerly a charging line had opposed to them muzzle-loading muskets of three hundred yards' range, and would have to stand only one volley, as there was no time to reload, but now with magazine guns of nearly two miles' range and machine guns, the attacking force could, with reasonably accurate marksmen, be destroyed before it could get near enough to use the bayonet. The reply was invariably, "Oh we must go at them with the bayonet." Englishmen do not change: they were the same when Braddock fell an easy prey to the Indians at Pittsburg; they were the same from Lexington to Yorktown; and when Pakenham charged Jackson's riflemen at New Orleans. There are no braver people than the English; but why they should spend \$1,250,000,000 and leave 25,000 of the flower of their land in African graves in the Boer War must ever remain a mystery to men who know anything of modern warfare.

In the field mentioned I found a Federal officer lying under a cedar bush, apparently for shade. On the bush was a large piece of paper on which was written, "This is the body of General Wadsworth of New York. It is requested that every at-

tention be given this distinguished officer." I was out of a job for the moment, and, riding back, sent an ambulance for the body. On my return I encountered another ambulance, containing General Longstreet and Colonel Latrobe of his staff. Longstreet was severely wounded and bled profusely. Latrobe had only flesh wounds in the thigh and hand. I had become separated from them in the advance.

When the ambulance containing General Wadsworth came back Dr. Gild, Medical Director of the Army, and his assistants were busy with Longstreet and Latrobe, but in a little while they examined the Federal general. He was alive, but Dr. Gild said he could not live long, that nothing could be done for him. He died that night. He was shot in the head, and although he was blind he talked incessantly. Dr. Gild tried to get some information from him in reference to Grant's movements, but in vain. When that subject was broached he emphatically shut up. Upon any other subject he talked freely and pleasantly. His reticence upon the subject of his commander's plans and the movements of his troops was a remarkable instance of what *noblesse oblige* means to a dying gentleman and soldier.

I think I have now described all I saw of the battle. I have said before in these papers that the soldier seldom sees much of a battle, especially in a wooded country, and this battle was fought in the woods, and with infantry only. I did not see any cavalry, and heard no artillery. The country was much like many parts of Virginia. The land appeared to be worn-out tobacco lands, left to grow up in scrub. The few open fields were covered with sedge-grass,—an unfailing sign of poor soil. The trees were rather small, oaks, pines, cedars, seldom large enough to shield a man from musketry, but thick enough on the ground to obstruct the vision. The vision was confined to a maximum of about a hundred yards, and often in the tangled thickets to ten yards. Artillery, therefore, was useless, for it was as likely to damage one side as the other; and cavalry, if it moved, was always in danger of an ambushade of infantry.

All I saw on my ride of about two and a half miles down the plank road to the field where the ordnance train was destroyed,

then on my ride back to Longstreet, about seven miles, then back again to the field above mentioned, and back again to where the medical department was giving aid to the wounded, about eighteen miles in all, and through the thickly wooded country, I have described. Of course I saw very little of the battle. I spent the remainder of the day looking for the reserved ordnance trains and trying to see what could be done to replace the ordnance train we had lost. I found on my second visit to it that but few wagons had been blown up by the enemy's bullets, and what was needed most was horses to move it.

Although I saw little of this battle, I of course heard a great deal. For instance, I was told that Heth's and Wilcox's Divisions, having lain down on their arms all night without rectifying their lines, were in no position to resist Grant's attack in the morning; that their lines formed a V, with the point of the V inverted, with the wings towards the enemy. If this were true, of course the men in front had a fire in their rear from the beginning; and no troops can stand that. I heard also that Longstreet's men faltered on one part of the line and that General Lee was prevented from leading them in a charge by the men taking his horse by the bridle and leading him out of the hot fire of the enemy. But of my own knowledge I know only what I have described.

There now began a race for Richmond. We expected Grant would attack the next morning, but learned instead that he was moving by his left flank towards Richmond. General Lee immediately moved by his right flank to intercept him, and brought him to bay at Spottsylvania Court House, where were fought several of the fiercest battles of the war, lasting, I think (speaking from memory only), about eight days. We supposed now that Grant would stop to recruit and refit; but no, he moved one night by his left flank again, and we moved also to intercept him by our right. In this race for Richmond there were many battles or fights, but nothing stopped Grant. He had men enough to fight Lee and march on Richmond too. He did not halt to bury his dead or care for his wounded. They were left, as at Spottsylvania, to their fate, which was a hard one, for we,

being fully employed in caring for our own men, could pay no attention to them.

I had no map but possessed some knowledge of the country, and how General Lee managed to keep Grant out of Richmond, I have never been able to understand. At Spottsylvania, we (Lee and Grant) were the same distance from Richmond. Grant, with double Lee's army, could fight and march at the same time, while Lee was obliged to stop when he fought in the day, and then march his tired men at night, against Grant's fresh men; and yet Lee saved Richmond, for the time, at least. I know, of course, nothing of the plans of either General, but it always looked to me as if Grant expected to crush Lee at the Wilderness. Well, he failed in this. Then he tried to crush Lee in the Spottsylvania fights. He failed in this. Then he tried to get possession of the road from Fredericksburg to Richmond. He failed in this also. Lee got the Fredericksburg road, and held it all the way down to Richmond by hard fighting and rapid marching. When we remember that Grant crossed the Rapidan with not less than 200,000 men, and that Lee could never have had over 60,000, the saving of Richmond was the most wonderful feat of the whole war. To me it seemed that we were fighting all day, and marching all night. There was no regular sleep for anybody, and less for General Lee than anyone. Whenever a marching column was halted for a few minutes the men threw themselves down in the road, and got a few moments' sleep. Whenever I saw General Lee he was awake, day or night. His healthy, vigorous body seemed not to need rest, but even if he needed it, his active and powerful adversary would not permit him to take it.

General Lee knew all the time that the price of safety was eternal vigilance, and he paid the price then, just as he always did during his whole life on earth.

At last we reached the James River, below Richmond. How long a time had elapsed since Grant crossed the Rapidan I do not remember. When we began the campaign, it was spring (May), and the weather was cool, especially at night. Now it was very hot, and I suppose about July. Having reached James River, Richmond was certainly safe for the moment, as all the

fortifications could now be manned by the best fighting troops the world ever saw, and I supposed we should now have some rest. But no, General Lee crossed the river the next morning and took the road to Petersburg, his staff following. About nine miles from Petersburg a courier met us and handed a dispatch to the General. In one moment he was going in a long, swinging gallop, his staff following, and we never drew rein until we rode into the town. I had done some hard riding during the war, but this ride of nine miles at full speed with the temperature above 90° was, for the length of it, harder on man and beast than any other.

When we started, the General was afraid, from his dispatches, that he would find Petersburg in the hands of the enemy, and if the enemy had shown the least enterprise it certainly would have been, for it was defended only by the citizens of the town, old men and a few disabled soldiers on sick leave. But we found it safe, and the entry of our troops almost on our heels, was a relief from all anxiety. General Lee was temporarily quartered in some public building, the Town Hall, I think, and the ladies sent in breakfast,—loaves of bread, butter and coffee,—which refreshed us after our hot ride.

History will record what was done by General Lee and his army in this campaign from the Wilderness to Petersburg; will describe all the battles and give the numbers of killed, wounded, and captured, things which I am not attempting. My task is mainly to relate those incidents which came under my observation, and which may be of some interest to those who may read these pages, but some have been forgotten in the lapse of years. There were some incidents I have already narrated in my sketches of General Lee which I have published elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> as being of almost a personal nature and not belonging especially to this campaign.

#### THE PETERSBURG CAMPAIGN

When we arrived at Petersburg we began at once to strengthen our lines. This was a task the magnitude of which may be par-

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<sup>1</sup>See *Harper's Monthly*, February, 1911, and *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, October, 1913.



tially understood when it is remembered that our lines extended from the left of Richmond to the right of Petersburg, covering a distance of about thirty miles, and all this work had to be done by the men in the army. There were some works around Richmond, but it was twenty-five miles to Petersburg, and work was necessary throughout this line and also to the right of Petersburg, to protect our right flank. And these works were not ordinary field works. In places the enemy's lines were very near, and our works had to be bomb-proof and approached by zig-zags, galleries, etc. The building of these works, the mounting of heavy guns, the building of roads and bridges, required all the officers and men of the army to work, and work hard.

At first the General and staff camped in tents on the north bank of the river, but as winter came on the General was ordered into a house on account of rheumatism, and he selected one on the south bank of the river about a mile from Petersburg. All the staff except the adjutant-general and aids remained on the north bank of the river, about a mile from the town and opposite General Lee's house. Being separated, I saw but little of the General during the winter. He rode up to our quarters occasionally, and sometimes dismounted and came into our tents, but I never went to his house unless I was sent for. However, I was not idle. The scarcity of men made it necessary to order all the men detailed as clerks back to their commands, and we lost the ordnance clerk, Overton Price, and I had to do all the writing of the office myself. This was near the spring, but before that the General sent me on many expeditions, giving me all the work I wanted.

To those not acquainted with the organization of an army, an explanation here may not be amiss. In every company of men, in infantry, artillery, and cavalry, there is an ordnance or quartermaster and commissary sergeant who makes up a report every morning and hands it to his captain. The captain of each company sends in his report to the adjutant of the regiment. The adjutant condenses the company reports and hands them to the colonel, who in turn forwards them to the adjutant-general of the brigade, and so on, to the division and the corps. When the

ordnance reports came to me I condensed them into one report, which was forwarded to General Lee.

Now this same system applied to each one of the departments of the army, quartermaster, commissary, medical, etc. In this way General Lee had every morning complete reports of the condition of his army. The ordnance reports gave him the number and character of the arms, and the number of rounds of ammunition in the hands of the men and in the ordnance trains of regiments, brigades, divisions, and corps, and in the reserve ordnance train of the whole army, also the number and character and calibre of guns in the artillery and the number of rounds of ammunition to each gun. The chief commissary gave him the rations on hand and available. The quartermaster gave him the amount of clothing, shoes, etc., and the transportation and the condition of it. The medical department gave him information as to hospital accommodation, medical stores, etc. The adjutant-general's department gave him the number of men present and fit for duty, the absent, sick, or on furlough, the number and character of the detailed men, etc.; and lastly, the inspector-general's department gave him an idea of the condition of his army generally, as to its excellence, or the contrary.

From the day of our arrival at Petersburg until the day we evacuated it, there was very little fighting. It was all routine work, with nothing exciting about it. The affair of the Crater and the fight at Hatcher's Run were about the only exceptions. In January I was sent to Lynchburg to arrange for a depot of supplies.

I seized several tobacco warehouses and some churches and filled them with stores. I knew nothing of General Lee's plans, of course, but I thought then and I think now, that he intended to give Grant the slip and not wait for the attack in the spring. General Lee knew that he could not move artillery and wagon trains in the spring, when the roads were soft and miry. Therefore, I accumulated, under his orders, a large quantity of ordnance stores at Lynchburg. That his plan of falling back on Lynchburg before the spring opened was overruled from Richmond, is apparent to me, because in the latter part of February I was again sent to Lynchburg, and nearly all the arms, ammunition,

heavy artillery, etc., which had been accumulated there, were shipped back to Petersburg, and much of it was destroyed by us the night of the evacuation, because there were not engines enough to move the heavy trains standing on the track and loaded with ordnance. Of course the result of the war would have been only postponed. The end was in sight, but General Lee's duty as a commander was to avoid being caught in a trap, and with his heavy supplies in Lynchburg, he could have fallen back in light marching order encumbered by no heavy supply trains and artillery, and Grant could not follow without his supply train. As it was, when the retreat was forced upon him (General Lee), the roads were in such condition that neither supply trains nor artillery could be moved, and we left them at every stage of the retreat, stuck in the bottomless mud, or blown up in Petersburg for the want of motive power.

On the first night of the retreat I came up with a battery of artillery stuck in the mud. The road behind was blocked with long trains of wagons and artillery, which were waiting for this battery to pull out. They (the batteries in the rear) could not pull out and pass. The road was through woods, and each side of it was water and swamp. An officer came along with fifty cavalry horses which were coming down to their command after wintering in the up-country. I told him I must have them to pull this battery out. He demurred, and I wrote an order by command of General Lee, and he yielded. We worked at that battery until daylight, the horses and guns sinking deeper and deeper in the morass at each effort, until the guns were under water, and the horses only showed their heads and backs above it. I gave the officer his horses, apologizing for their muddy and forlorn condition. The captain asked me what he should do with the battery and I told him he had better save his horses, the battery was beyond saving; and I know that this was the condition of many batteries and wagon trains that night. The roads in our rear were strewn with them for miles, hopelessly lost.

Now I do not believe this was General Lee's fault. I am sure he intended to send all his artillery and supply trains up-country before the frost came out of the ground and the roads became

impassable, and then retreat unencumbered by wagons or artillery. Otherwise, why was I sent to Lynchburg, and why were many light batteries sent back as far as Amelia Court House? Someone blundered, but it was not General Lee; although, I suppose, he took all the blame upon himself, as was his habit.

Soon after our arrival at Petersburg and the excitement of the campaign was over, it became apparent to me and to many others that our cause was hopeless; nevertheless, I believe that all the army, from General Lee down, worked on as hard as if success depended on their efforts. Immense works and approaches were built, heavy guns mounted, mines and countermines dug, and all this with the fighting men of the command. And it must be remembered that this fighting strength had been greatly impaired in the sixty days' campaign and terrible battles from the Wilderness to Petersburg.

As I have before said, our line could not have been less than thirty miles long, and many parts of that line were defended by a mere line of skirmishers, the men in line standing thirty feet apart. When it is remembered that our regiments were now reduced to two hundred men, and in many cases under that, and that of these only half could be counted on for duty, my statement can be understood. All the men had chills every other day. The men on duty had had their chills the day before, and the men in the rear with their chills on them came on duty and replaced the men in front, as soon as their chill was over. Really all these men should have been in hospitals, as none of them were fit for duty.

If Grant had known our real condition he could have walked over our works any night almost without a contest. When the explosion of the Crater took place he could have poured his whole army through our works and put an end to the war then and there. Think of his allowing Mahone, with a part of his remnant of a division, the whole not 5,000 strong, to drive back his attack after the explosion. He had had time to march 50,000 men through that gap, and to deploy the greater part of them, or enough, at any rate, to secure his position within our line of works and defend it against any force we could have commanded. Our line was thirty miles long, and before we could

have brought our army together it would have been destroyed in detachments, just as it was destroyed in the end.

When the retreat was forced upon General Lee it was impossible to bring his army together. There was no time to do it, the distances were too great, and the different sections fell an easy prey to his powerful enemy, following closely on them, and in some cases intercepting them on their march to join their General. My opinion formed at that time was founded upon information exceptionally good. I took no notes, and therefore cannot give any figures, but I certainly knew every day the ordnance strength, and being in close contact with the heads of departments, gleaned a great deal of knowledge of those departments, and knew pretty accurately the strength and disposition and resources of the whole army.

At last the blow was struck. Early in April, on a bright Sunday morning, we heard at our camp that A. P. Hill had been attacked and overpowered, and was retreating up the south bank of the Appomattox. This meant the immediate evacuation of Petersburg. I was dressed for church; but there was no church for any of us that day. I rode at once into Petersburg and met General Lee in the street. He said he wished to see Colonel Baldwin, but I did not know where he was. The General then told me that the town must be evacuated during the day and desired me to get what ordnance stores I could out of the town and to destroy what could not be moved. I told him I was already engaged in doing this. But there was little I could do. The few available engines had already pulled out with as much as they could draw, and there were no wagons to be had, and if there had been wagons they would have stuck in the mud before they went far. I remained in town until midnight, the time appointed for the burning of Pocahontas Bridge, a wooden structure over the Appomattox. When I reached our camp, about a mile up the river, there was no one there. All had joined the retreat up the river, along the north bank. I looked back and saw the burning bridge. The trains of cars had already been set on fire.

I soon overtook the wagons and artillery toiling through the mud, many hopelessly stuck. The further I rode, the more

hopeless it all seemed to be. I did what I could, which was really nothing, and came up with General Lee at a farm house on the roadside, about sunrise.

On the retreat all officers were ordered to abandon their luggage, retaining only the clothes they wore and one change of underclothing, which could be strapped on their saddles. At last I was ordered to destroy the ordnance records. The big camp desk filled with papers was lifted from our wagon to the ground and I set it afire; and here occurred the only amusing incident of the retreat. A crowd of officers and servants was standing around, looking at the fire which lighted up the night. I had forgotten a pair of revolvers in one of the drawers, and presently ten shots in rapid succession were fired from the desk. As the pistols changed position from the recoil of each shot, the firing was in all directions, and the disorderly and undignified mode of the retreat of the onlookers could not have been exceeded if a shell from one of Grant's big guns had burst in their midst.

It was plain to everybody, I think, that our cause, which we had believed to be in danger ever since the Gettysburg campaign, was now hopeless. That we might cut our own way out, join forces with General Johnston and retire into the mountains and thus prolong the struggle, was spoken of and advocated by a few optimists; but the sober thoughts of thinking people who knew the exhaustion of our resources, both in men and supplies, gave no room for hope, although they gave no expression to their views. The most admirable trait of the Army of Northern Virginia was their entire faith and trust in their commander. Reduced now to less than 10,000 men, with artillery and supply trains utterly lost, hungry, footsore, half clothed, they were as ready as ever for attack. Several times during the retreat we were threatened by contact with the enemy and our men went into line of battle with all the *élan* which belonged to the Army of Northern Virginia in its glorious days of prowess. If General Lee had given the order, that little band would have cut its way through Grant's Army without a doubt. How many would have been left to tell the tale we do not know, probably one-half of the force would have been left on that bloody field and four

thousand men would have constituted what was once the invincible Army of Northern Virginia. The surrender of their chief averted this final catastrophe; but years will come and years will go and the brave deeds of the Army of Northern Virginia will never be forgotten. They will be told in marble, they will be told on the painter's canvas, they will be told at the family fireside and wherever boys are taught to be men.

I will not attempt to give any further account of the retreat and surrender. I know this has been done by others, although I have read no history of the war or any description of any part of it. What I saw of it is not worth recounting, and I will leave the subject here.

A. R. H. RANSON.

Catonsville, Maryland.